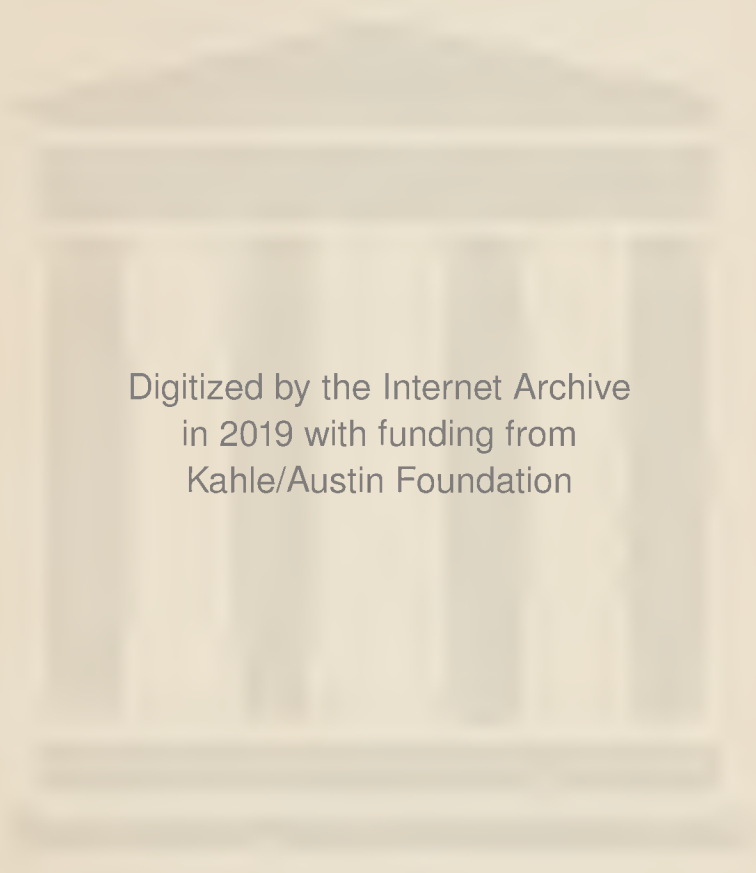


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and the
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ROBERT BURNS

AND THE COMMON PEOPLE

BY

WILLIAM STEWART



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“ My Compeers, the Common People.”

—BURNS.

*“ He came when poets had forgot
How rich and strange the human lot ;
How warm the tints of Life ; how hot
Are Love and Hate ;
And what makes Truth divine, and what
Makes Manhood great.”*

—WILLIAM WATSON.

“ I am one of the sons of little men.”

—BURNS.

ROBERT BURNS was born at Alloway, near Ayr, January 25, 1759.

The first edition of his poems was published at Kilmarnock in 1786.

The second edition was published at Edinburgh, 1787.

Editions innumerable have been published since all over the English-speaking world.

He died at Dumfries, July 21, 1796, just ten years from the publication of his first edition.

He was born in poverty, and he died in poverty. But he enriched the world.

FOREWORD

A FOREWORD is never a foreword. It is an afterthought. It is the last thing written, and would be described as a postscript were it not that it is placed at the beginning instead of at the end. A foreword is an indication that the author having written his book has now begun to have doubts as to whether he has not been wasting his time. I have no such doubts. I think this is a good and necessary book, and does not stand in need of any postscriptive foreword. I have observed that the foreword to a book is usually either explanatory or apologetic. Sometimes it is both. Mine will be neither. The book will be its own explanation. And as for apology, I have none to offer. I shall most certainly continue to think that it is a good book, though all the readers and all the reviewers should think

otherwise. Why should I apologise for having produced a good book ?

This, then, is the Foreword :

I hope that what I have written will prove to be stimulative of thought concerning the relation of Burns' work to the present time ; and even if the stimulus arises through resentment or antagonism to the ideas expressed, the writer's purpose will still have been achieved. If, on the contrary, my book be not stimulative, then I shall agree it had better not have been written.

WILLIAM STEWART.

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THE OLD SCOTS WORLD

THERE has been much disputation about Robert Burns, concerning his character, the nature and quality of his genius, and his place in the world of literature.

This, however, remains undisputed and indisputable: he is the first great poet of the common people; meaning thereby, not merely that he is the first great poet to emerge from the common people, but the first who has found in them his continual theme and the source of his inspiration. Therein rests the assurance of his permanent place among the world's immortal singers; for the future belongs to the common people. But while his position as the poet of the common people has been taken for granted, its significance as a means of estimating the value of his service to humanity has been almost wholly

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lost sight of by his numerous commentators, critics, and worshippers, who, in their desire to *place* him comparatively with other poets and men of letters, have failed to give proportionate consideration to his value as a *force* in the shaping of the thought of humanity, and consequently in the directing of human affairs. The trend towards democracy during the last hundred years owes more to Robert Burns than has yet been conceded in any estimate of his character and work.

This tendency to overlook and ignore Burns' chief characteristic found its most notable illustration in the late Mr. Henley's famous, or at least notorious essay, and also in the nature of the criticisms evoked by that brilliant but lop-sided performance. Quite a flood of invective ensued, mostly from perfervid Scottish patriots, and directed chiefly against the essayist's slightly brutal references to the poet's personal failings

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rather than to the main argument whereby Henley, in the very act of paying homage to the Scottish poet's genius, sought to classify him as a poetical back-number, a kind of glorious antique, whose influence upon modern thought was to all intents and purposes a negligible quantity.

The incensed enthusiasts, in their zeal for the character of their hero, flew off at a tangent, leaving the main issue practically untouched, and proving that they, equally with their adversary, had not even begun to appreciate the true nature of Burns' service to humanity, which consists not only in that he was a great Scottish poet, but in the fact that he was a great poet with a new message. Henley and his critics alike were concerned with the medium of the message rather than with the message itself. They failed to look for that which Carlyle had desiderated concerning Burns seventy years previously—

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a true standard "whereby to estimate what he really was and did in the eighteenth century for his country and the world."

Henley's theory is that Burns was the last (and of course the greatest) of the old Scots school of poets ; a theory which may be undeniably true, and yet leave the essential truth unspoken. He contrives to make his theory seem convincing, and almost scientific, by setting it up against another imaginary theory which is even more misleading. Here is the theory, as elaborated in the preface to the centenary edition. I quote it in full, as it helps me in the way I want to go.

"Burns," says Henley, "for all his exhibition of some modern tendencies, was not the founder of a dynasty, but the heir of a flourishing tradition, and *the last of an ancient line* ; he is demonstrably the outcome of an environment, and not in any but the narrowest sense the unnatural birth of Poesy and Time,

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which he is sometimes held to be. Being a great artist, he derives from a numerous ancestry ; and like all great artists, he is partly an effect of local and peculiar conditions, and partly the product of immediate and remote forebears. Genius apart, in fact, he is *ultimus Scotorum*, the last expression of the old Scots world, and therewith the culmination of a school deep-rooted in the past, which by producing such men as Dunbar and Scott, and Alexander Montgomery ; as Ramsay and Fergusson, and the nameless lyrists of the song-books, made it possible for him to be."

Thus is Burns safely deposited amongst the ancients and securely barred out from amongst the moderns, of whom he was the forerunner ; from the company of the poets of freedom—Shelley and Byron and Wordsworth and Longfellow and Whitman and Swinburne. "Burns was of us," said Browning ; but W. E. Henley thought otherwise,

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and maintained his conclusions, as we see, most learnedly and plausibly. We can almost see Burns in the making, and especially in the ending ; deriving from his numerous ancestry and ending as "*ultimus Scotorum*, the last expression of the old Scots world." "He is demonstrably the outcome of an environment." Who will deny it of Burns, or of any other ? We are all the outcome of an environment, not the great artists only but the obscure dullards and nobodies, and all this learned theorising does not take us very far, either in accounting for Robert Burns or in estimating his work, least of all in measuring the *effect* of his work.

Henley, of course, does not apply his pseudo-determinism literally and scientifically. To do that he would have had to trace the genealogy of the peasant man and woman from whom Burns sprang, and that would have been no easy task—beyond a certain

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not very remote point, quite impossible—though along that line of inquiry there might have been found the sources of some at least of those transmitted mental characteristics which specially distinguished him, and in their combination constitute what we call the genius of Burns. That grandsire who was out in the '45. and that other relative on the maternal side who died at Aird's Moss fighting for religious liberty, had probably a greater share in the mental make-up of this imaginative, patriotic, and liberty-loving peasant-poet than all his literary predecessors.

It is not, however, the poet's lineal ancestry that is called to witness, but his literary ancestry ; certain Scottish poets from whom Burns learned some of his poetic craftsmanship, but whose work, it should be noted, was available to others than Burns, and to some of them in a much greater degree than it could ever have been to this working plough-man.

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Henley's contribution to Scottish literary history is valuable, doubtless, but it does not account for Robert Burns. It helps to explain why, Robert Burns being there, he of necessity worked through certain stereotyped methods of expression, but it does not account for the nature of the expression, for the thing expressed. And it does not explain why this numerous literary ancestry should have culminated in this particular Scottish peasant, and not in another ; in Robert, for example, and not in Gilbert. No theory that I have heard of can explain that. Henley himself seems to recognise this, and leaves a way out which sets his whole theory on one side.

“*Genius apart, he is ultimus Scotorum.*” But genius apart there would have been no Burns the poet. There would only have been Burns the ploughman, who would have had no use for the literary ancestry ; and we should

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not to-day be discussing the why and the wherefore of him. On the whole, when we come to look at the matter closely, Henley simply rehabilitates the theory he set out to destroy, the theory that Burns *is* the unnatural birth of Poesy and Time, which is a sorry end to a painstaking argument, and is of course absurd.

Certainly, the conclusion that Burns is merely the last of an ancient line is altogether untenable in view of the fact that to-day, after one hundred years, his appeal is still to that element in humanity which looks *forward* rather than backward. Walter Scott, who came later, is more antiquarian, not to say antiquated, both in spirit and outlook than Robert Burns. It is not true even to say that he was the last of the Scottish vernacular school of poetry. The greatest certainly, but not the last. There has probably been more vernacular verse written since his time

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than before it, some of it of a kind that would rank very high had it not to bear comparison with the supreme glory of Burns himself, who stands towards it as the great exemplar. I call to mind "Kilmeny" and some of the songs of Lady Nairne as examples that will compare not unfavourably with the best of the Scots vernacular poetry anterior to Burns.

When we are told that Burns was the last expression of the old Scots world, we naturally ask, "Which old Scots world?" For there have been more than one, and there were more than one comprised in the period of time covered by the poetic pedigree cited by Henley. Dunbar, the greatest of our Scottish poets prior to Burns, and the only one comparable to him in point of genius, was a begging Franciscan friar, and later a court dependant; Henryson, who preceded him, was a schoolmaster who taught his scholars within the precincts of a still flourishing

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abbey and beneath the shadow of a royal palace wherein the Scottish king still held his court. Their world was a Catholic world—semi-scholarly, semi-barbarous, mediæval and feudalistic. Burns could not be said to be the last expression of *that* old Scots world. The Reformation had made an end of it.

Scott and Montgomery belonged to the turbulent time immediately following the Reformation, when it was still a question of doubt whether the new or the old forms of religion would mould the thoughts and dominate the life of the Scottish people—a time in which art of any kind found small opportunity for expression. With *that* old Scots world Burns had nothing in common. From these elder “makkars,” so far as he was conversant with them—which was not very far—he borrowed some of his rhythms and measures, but nothing of his poetic outlook. He was born into a Protestant, Calvinistic

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world, as different from theirs as the twentieth century is from the eighteenth. Ramsay and Fergusson were also of that later world; but of their verse the most that can be said is that it was symptomatic of the reaction against the too strait-laced puritanism superimposed by Calvinistic theology upon the social life of the Scottish people.

From them Burns took nothing but the stimulus of their example. He was too close to reality to be misled by the romantic gentle shepherds of Allan Ramsay; while the more original Fergusson, dying before he had rightly begun to live, had no great legacy to pass on to his great successor. Burns paid homage to both, especially Fergusson, recognising in his fate some affinity with his own. But he looked upon that old Scots world quite differently from them: from the standpoint of the peasant, and with the eye of genius. Where they saw only the surface and fringes

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of society he saw it comprehensively, and discovered what neither poet nor historian had yet discovered—the importance of the common people.

To the suggestion that what Henley meant was that Burns is the last expression of Scottish life and character before it became absorbed and merged in the life and character of the English people, there is the plain answer that *the absorption has not yet taken place*, after a hundred years' opportunity for assimilation. Scottish life and character has changed in consonance with modern industrial environment, but it has not become English life and character.

Nationality has a habit of persisting. It derives some of its most vital characteristics from the natural features of the country in which it has been nourished; and although it is true that modern industrial methods have a uniforming tendency, temporarily destructive

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of individuality both in persons and nations, modern industrialism has not yet laid low the Scottish hills, nor softened the Scottish climate, nor taken the bloom off the heather. What it has done has been to take the people from the hills and from the land and place them in conditions where the assertion of character, national or personal, is more difficult than it was formerly. That, however, as all students of history know, is a passing phase. The Scottish people will get back to the Scottish land, and it will probably be found that not the least of the triumphs of the reorganised society of the future will consist in the restoration of communal individuality under permanently favourable conditions; thus providing fresh outlets for Art and Literature, and freeing them from that commercialist dominance in the midst of which they strive, even now with some measure of success, for natural expression.

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Let it not be forgotten that once before Scottish literature was Anglicised almost out of existence, yet reasserted itself, the chief instrument in the revival being this same Robert Burns.

Given the right conditions, which are sure to come, it will do so again ; and just as even now, in the midst of the alleged Anglo-Saxon ascendancy, there exists a distinctive Scottish School of Art, so also once again will there be a distinctive Scottish School of Literature, and the whole world will, as in the past, be the gainer thereby. And the renaissance, when it does arrive, will find itself debtor to Robert Burns. It will take its tune from the Ayrshire peasant. For the future literary revival in Scotland and elsewhere must be, in the very nature of things, democratic. It must reflect the thoughts, passions, manners, and aspirations of the common people. Burns was the first amongst the poets to discover

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the common people, not merely objectively nor yet subjectively, as abstract material for the literary artist, but as the very source and foundation of inspiration. It might be better to say that Burns *revealed* the common people in his own personality and in his poetry, which in its every mood and phase is the expression of his personality. By virtue of that expression Burns holds his place, not only amongst the reminiscent singers of a world that is dead and buried, but amongst the great poets of the world to come.

A MAN'S A MAN

A MAN'S A MAN

IT is not necessary to claim Burns as the founder of a dynasty. The realm of poesy indeed is, and has ever been, republican rather than dynastic; its gates wide open always, and its borders never so circumscribed by old tradition as to bar the way against newcomers with new ideals, or with new modes of expressing the old ideals.

Not the founder of a dynasty, but the pioneer of a new poetic enterprise. To speak of Burns as merely the heir to deep-rooted conventions is absurd. He brushed the old conventions aside. He made use of the old modes of expression, it is true, but he made use of them to express a new conception. Just as one might use an old earth-worn spade to dig up bright gold and shining diamonds; just as Columbus made use of an old-world Ship to seek out a new world.

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And yet the new world discovered by Burns was, as we have seen, a very old world. It was the world of the common people. "The merry, friendly country folks"; the "poor, oppressed, honest man"; the "toil-worn cottar"; the "buidly chieles and clever hizzies"; in fact, all those ordinary, everyday folk upon whose "toils obscure an' a' that" depends, and has always depended, the entire fabric of society; in Burns's own phrase, "the simple hind, *whose toil upholds the glittering show.*"

They had been there from the beginning, these peasants, the basic element in Scottish national life. They were there through all the centuries, the burden-bearers, fechtin' men, and daily drudges, what time Henryson and Dunbar, and Scott and Montgomery, and David Lyndsay and Drummond of Hawthornden were weaving their poetic fancies and polishing their rhyming apostrophes. But the common people remained almost as

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invisible to these mediæval poets and poetasters as they were, and are still, to the orthodox historian.

It needed a peasant-poet to see the peasant rightly. With Burns the people are not subsidiary ; with him the people are all in all. It is the others who are subsidiary and parasitical ; the belted knights and the struttin' birkies of lords, alike with the king their maker. For the first time these are placed in their right perspective, and the people step forward. This is a part of the real abiding service which Burns rendered to humanity ; a service which will remain, even though—what is not likely—with the passing of the ages and the decay of the Scottish doric every scrap of his writings should find oblivion. He dignified, he elevated the common people. He saw them as no one else had ever seen them ; as they had not even seem themselves, until he held up the mirror in which they were

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able for the first time to recognise their own importance, and were made thereby to become almost involuntarily socially conscious ; what we to-day call class conscious.

I would not be misunderstood. Working-class life had been casually versified before Burns' time. I do not forget "Christ's Kirk on the Green," nor "Habbie Simpson," nor "Maggie Lauder." I do not forget the "nameless lyrists of the song-books," nor the unknown folk-singers whose rough-and-ready reflections of incidental phases of working-class life it was part of Burns' work to transfigure and purify ; and I would be no true Scot if I sought to depreciate the value of their services in keeping alive the flickering flame of Scottish song in the hearts of the people in the days of their serfdom. But that is the full extent of their services. They are episodal, fragmentary Not one, nor all of them, present a comprehensive picture of working-

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class life, or reveal the spirit of the common people. And they do not uplift nor inspire. The common people, so far as they speak for themselves, or are spoken for, in song and ballad, are still quite contentedly the lower classes, the serfs and hinds and menials. Burns completely changed the point of view. With him there enters into the literature of the people a note of self-respect; nay, more, a note of exaltation. He was the first to say, "A man's a man for a' that!" He said it not in one song only, but in many songs. In his satires against Calvinism not less than in his sarcasms against pride of place and privilege; in his lamentations for human suffering not less than in his songs of the joy of life. The thought itself, embodying the principle of natural equality irrespective of rank or caste or material possessions, was not an entirely new thought. For a generation at least it had been permeating the mind of Europe,

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silently sapping and mining at the foundations of feudalism. It found philosophic expression in the writings of Rousseau, and was the moving principle behind the French Revolution. Paine in his "Rights of Man" familiarised it to the English-speaking race, and it managed to get itself embedded in the constitution of the new American republic, where, cynics say, it has remained stowed away safe and harmless ever since ; an interment due to the growth of new social distinctions created by capitalistic developments which neither Rousseau, nor Tom Paine, nor Washington could foresee, developments which make the affirmation of the principle as necessary to-day as it was a hundred years ago. But till Burns came the new idea had not found its poet. He was the first to give it utterance in song, that method of appeal which most convincingly reaches the mind of the common people. His was no last minstrel's lay sighing

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over declining feudalistic glories. It was a forerunner's song heralding the coming of the common people, and has been echoed and re-echoed by nearly every great singer since his day. It has been carried round the world by the emigrating and colonising Scottish peasantry, and enters into the very fibres of the new over-seas democracies. "A man's a man!" With the striking of this note the common people began to take their rightful place in literature and in the world. Their enfranchisement had begun, though parliament had to wait a hundred years for the tread of their footsteps. In one day, in the mere lilt of a song, so to speak, democracy leapt forward. Democracy in Scotland asserted itself, not with a vote, nor with a sword, but with a song; and whether in its final vindication democracy shall use the vote or the sword, behind the weapon and the blow will be the song of Robert Burns. Ere the theory of Socialism

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had begun to shape itself, the claim of Socialism had found a voice. For what is the claim of Socialism but this—that the conditions shall prevail wherein manhood shall have free play, wherein a man shall be a man? This was Burns' message to humanity. He was the first great poet to deliver that message; and the fact that despite the limitations of his medium of expression he was able to command the world's attention, stamps him for ever as one of the world's men of power. His medium was the vernacular, the hamely, auld Scots doric; a form of speech familiar only to a small corner of the British dominions, a language, as some say, uncouth and obscure, well-nigh obsolete, and, when Burns appeared, ready to be swept away by the rising Anglo-Saxon flood. It was good enough for Burns and his message. The old Scots doric was to him as an ancient harp might be to a minstrel of genius, who from the thumb-worn strings

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awakens a great new heart-stirring melody. Burns' new melody on the old Scottish harp reaches to the heart of humanity, and places him among the poets who are more than local and more than national, who are universal and for all time. For while there is no poet who is so truly in the literal sense of the term a national poet, yet there is none who has done so much as he to break down national boundaries and destroy racial antipathies. The common people are the common people in all lands. A man's a man, or ought to be, everywhere.

This poetic promulgation of the idea of natural human rights was all the more notable because of the time and the place and the circumstances in which it found utterance. All the conditions in Scotland, political, social, and ecclesiastical, were such as to stifle the very idea of independence. Politically,

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Scotland had sunk into a mere appendage of England ; and Burns' malediction—

“ Lord, send a rough-shod troop o' hell,
O'er a' wad Scotland buy and sell ! ”

was already well earned. Her government was simply a corrupt bureaucracy manipulated in the interests of a few territorial families. Her industrial system was no more than a kind of bastard feudalism with the overlordship responsibilities left out. Her religious life had degenerated from the democratic conception of Knox into superstitious formalism.

It was Burns who said, “Facts are chiels that winna ding, and daurna be disputed.” Yet his whole work, his life, he himself, what were they but protests against existing facts—against the dominant facts of the society in which he was placed ? The fact of ecclesiastical authority controlling men's beliefs ; the facts of kingly, or aristocratic, or plutocratic authority controlling men's actions.

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He disputed the facts all along the line, and “dang” them to some tune, though he himself ultimately went down in the conflict. And there was one tremendous fact involved in all these others, the rightfulness of which he disputed all through life, and with his latest breath : the fact of poverty—the poverty of the common people.

He had no illusions concerning the world in which he lived, this peasant. He was no dreamy mystic, nor yet romanticist. Idealist he was, as all poets are, but he was also realist, as many poets are not. Occasional glances he cast backward into the romance of a lost cause, as of the Stuarts ; but concerning the actual world in which he lived he had no misconceptions. He was too near to reality—

“ . . . Nurst in the Peasant's lowly shed,
To hardy Independence bravely bred,
By early Poverty to hardship steeled,
And trained to arms in stern Misfortune's field.”

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The son of a "toil-worn cottar," he himself toil-worn and not a little care-scarred, even ere he had emerged from childhood, he knew, and never ceased to know, that his fate was the fate of all his social compeers. He was born in poverty, he lived in poverty, and he died in poverty. That was, and is, the fate of the common people. Burns' attitude towards that fate was never acquiescence, but rebellion always. He never accepted poverty for justice. He accepted it for what it was and is—injustice. "Why should a'e man better fare, an' a' men brithers?" Even in his most philosophical and kindest mood he enters his protest—

"It's hardly in a body's pow'r
To keep at times frae being sour,
To see how things are shared.
How best o' chieles are whyles in want,
While coofs on coontless thousands rant
An kenna how to ware't."

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The modern apologists for things as they are, who from time to time seek to ordain Burns in the popular mind as a kind of high priest of the gospel of content, are guilty of the worst kind of perversion. The puritans who sermonise over his social failings never did worse than that. They have some basis for their sermons. The others have none for their misdirected eulogiums. Burns loved to "tak' aff his dram," and he "dearly lo'ed the lasses," and sometimes he gave his muse a loose rein down pleasure's more disreputable byways—practices all of them antipathetic to the "unco guid"; but he was no apostle of social contentment. He was, as every rebel must be, a discontented man. And in this, as in most other aspects of his character, he was typical. His discontent was the expression of the justifiable discontent of his class, the common people. It is true that he reflected also the brave optimism of labouring folk,

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who even out of the hardest environment contrive for themselves a little happiness. The natural gaiety of the man, his loving kindness, and his ever present sense of humour reveal themselves in his intensely sympathetic descriptions of the simple pleasures of peasant life ; but ever and anon he flames out in wrath and rage against the injustice of the peasant's fate, or melts into tears of pity for the hard, unlovely lot of the poor. That the life of the eighteenth-century Scottish peasant was not utterly joyless is true, just as it is true to-day that the inhabitant of the city slum can catch an occasional glimpse of the sun. But neither the peasant's transient joys nor the slum-dweller's stolen sunshine justify contentment. They rather, because of their evanescence and precariousness, intensify the sense of wrong. Of the transitory pleasures of the Scottish peasantry no one has given so vivid impressions as Burns. Their Hallowe'en

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feasts and Fasten-e'en rockins ; their kirns and weddings and New Year social gatherings ; their domestic felicities—

“ The canty auld folks, crackin' croose,

The young anes rantin' through the hoose ” ;

their John Barleycorn joys, and the joys of love, lawful and illicit ; all the intermittent relaxations with which the labour-weary peasants sought to beguile the “kiaugh and care” of their daily lives—they are all to be found in the pages of Burns, and remain a priceless possession, illuminative at once of the social habits of the people and of the unconquerable vitality of the Scottish race. But these are fitful joys, snatched from a dreary environment of harassing care and toil and trouble ; they are the bright spots in a picture lit up by the genius and humour of Burns, but a picture whose shadows are deep and sombre, and whose background is poverty. “The Cottar's Saturday Night” presents a pleasant, restful,

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almost idyllic grouping, but it is a "toil-worn" man who sits at the head of the table; the "priest-like father" trudged "weary o'er the moors" only an hour ago, and his "spade, his mattocks, and his hoes" are truer emblems of his daily life than is the "big ha'-Bible." They are happy enough peasant folk who gather round the fire on that "merry day the year begins." They deserve to be, for all the rest of the year it has been their lot to "drudge and drive through wet and dry," "howkin' in sheuchs" and "biggin' dykes wi' dirty stanes," getting rheumatism in their bones, and growing old before their time. Too old at forty is hardly an exclusively twentieth-century grievance. Listen to Burns, and, while you admire his handling of the doric, realise the tragedy of the life of the common people—

“For, ance that five-and-forty’s speel’d,
See crazy, weary, joyless eild,
Wi’ wrinkled face,
Comes hostin’, hirplin’ owre the field
Wi’ creepin’ pace.”

A MAN'S A MAN

This is no mere poetic figure. It is grim realism. Burns saw it exemplified in his own father, who was prematurely beaten into his grave by toil and care and poverty.

The background of Burns' picture of Scottish peasant life is poverty. In the picture there is love and laughter, and dram-drinking, and high spirits in plenty, but at the back of it all, beclouding it all, there is poverty. And not only material poverty, but spiritual, or shall we say unspiritual, poverty? There are not only the humiliated, "poor tenant bodies, tholin' the factor's snash"; not only the

"Poor o'er-laboured wight, so abject, mean and
vile,
Begging a brother of the earth to give him leave
to toil ;"

not only "age and want, that ill-matched pair," symbolical of the utter hopelessness of the labourer's lot ; but side by side with these there are the "Ayr Presbyters" and the

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“Holy Fairs,” and the “Holy Willies,” with their “three-mile prayers and half-mile graces,” with their narrow spiritual outlook, their intolerance and bigotry, and all the spirit-cramping, soul-destroying tyranny of hide-bound creeds and ignorant superstitions which held the common people in mental fetters, and over a whole nation seemed to give the lie to the assertion that “a man’s a man.” It is the picture of a people laird-ridden and priest-ridden, held, in fact, in a double bond of poverty, material and mental. And it was from the midst of this environment that Burns sent his message to the world, “A Man’s a Man for a’ that ! ”

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ROBERT BURNS was in rebellion against both kinds of poverty. That is not to say that he set himself deliberately to wage war against the forces that create poverty. Burns was not a man of deliberation, except towards the end of his life. Had he been, it might have been better for himself, though the worse for the world's poetic heritage. He never sought out the enemy in the gate. There was no need. The enemy sought him out. Poverty found him where the muse found him, at the plough. Perhaps it might be truer to say that poverty placed him there. Burns was in rebellion instinctively, and the nature of his revolt was determined by the circumstances of his immediate environment. He was girt round about by the visible effects of poverty, material

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and mental. To effectively fight the former was impossible. To escape from it was equally impossible. But mental poverty—the repression of mind and spirit—to fight that was not only possible, it was unavoidable to a man like Burns. Gifted with the power of satirical expression to a degree vouchsafed to no other man before or since, he found himself, just when his genius was ripening to activity, in his Ayrshire parish, right in the heart of what ultimately, and very largely through his intervention, developed into a nation-wide conflict between authority and rationalism in religion. There was only one possible side for Robert Burns. He was for liberty always. He took his side, not deliberately, but because he could do naught else. It was his nature to. It must be remembered, what usually is forgotten, that he chose the unpopular side; the side which, superficially looked at, was opposed to the rights of the

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people. It was only through his influence that it ultimately became popular. The common people of Scotland were not burning with zeal for religious liberty. They had no desire to be set free from the thralldom of creeds. Their personal devil had become to them a kind of necessity ; and they saw nothing wrong with a God who sent “ane to heaven and ten to hell” for His own glory. It was not the people who were demanding a more liberal theology. It was, strange though it may seem, certain liberal-minded church patrons who were thrusting new theologians upon narrow-minded and unwilling presbyteries and congregations. Burns was on the side of the liberal-minded patrons and the new theologians. That is to say, he *appeared* to be against the people. The people had to be set free, not from corrupt church government, but first of all from the slavery of their own minds.

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This was Burns' achievement, not deliberately undertaken, but in the assertion of his own mental freedom. One thing the common people of Scotland had never lost amidst all their abasement. They still retained their sense of humour. And Burns' humour, bitter and kindly by turns, directed against their ingrained beliefs, caught them where they were most vulnerable. It appealed, as all true humour ever does, to their common sense. A petty parochial squabble it seemed ; an affair of presbyteries, and kirk-sessions, and patrons, intermingled with personal rancours and spites ; a parish pump affair, one would have said, had not Robert Burns been there. But Robert Burns being there made all the difference. His satires—not even meant to be printed—against the Presbytery of Ayr and all the little crowd of heresy-hunters struck at the very heart of religious intolerance everywhere. Bigotry was put

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upon its defence, and this was the kind of attack to which bigotry is unaccustomed. The appeal was, as I have said, not to authority, or precedent, or metaphysics, but to common sense. "Curst common sense, that imp o' he!" as the other side naturally regarded it, and as Burns phrased it for them.

In half-a-dozen poems, written in the leisure moments of a working farmer's life, more was done for the intellectual liberation of the Scottish people than has been accomplished by the entire army of higher critics since that time. The higher criticism, indeed, is largely the outcome of Burns' attack, and in some of its aspects is little more than a soothing apologetic, intended to dull the edge of the Ayrshire peasant's weapons. The particular phase of the quarrel which brought Burns into the fray has long since disappeared. But the main quarrel, between authority and reason, between bigotry and common sense, is raging

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still; and the Scottish peasant-poet is still in the front of the battle.

Thus it was fated that this son of genius, whose own personal and ever-present quarrel was with material poverty, should deliver his first strong blows against mental poverty, the poverty which enslaves the mind. That, as I say, was a matter of circumstance. Had he been born and bred in another part of the west of Scotland, amongst the weavers of Glasgow, for example, or had he lived longer, who can doubt that his genius would have been at the service of the Reform movement, which was then struggling into existence? And who can doubt that in that case we should have had from him more than the one or two casual references to Muir and Palmer, the Reform martyrs. Almost certainly he would himself have been amongst the martyrs. As it is, his influence on that side of the progressive movement is greater than can be measured.

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The struggle for political freedom was simply the materialistic counterpart of the free-thought conflict ; differing only in that its basis was economic rather than spiritual, its purpose social rather than religious.

In essence the two movements were, and are, one and the same ; seeking always to establish liberty for body and soul. Whoever was fighting in the one was helping the other.

Burns was in both. He was against oppression, whether the instrument was the priest or the laird, the presbytery or the Government ; whether the source of authority was Kirk or State, Calvinism or feudalism ; fighting in the only way possible for him, not with the weapons of the agitators or the politicians, but with the weapons of the poet ; and doing this, not deliberately and with calculation, but incidentally, instinctively, and impulsively. The case for the people as against caste, and wealth, and privilege has never been stated more

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powerfully than by Robert Burns. In two poems, widely differentiated from each other in style and artistry, he has probed to its very core the disease of modern society. "The Twa Dogs" and "Man was made to Mourn" express the whole of Burns' social philosophy. They also embody the whole of the present-day indictment, economic and moral, against society. "Man was made to Mourn" is at once a lamentation and a protestation, a song of tears and, if we would read it aright, a call to arms. They pervert the very spirit of the poem who find in it a fatalistic acceptance of universal doom, an embittered version of the Hebrew preacher's "Vanity of vanities!" Burns did not believe that man is *born* to trouble "as the sparks fly upward," that the purpose of man's being is sorrow. He did not believe that "man was made to mourn." Was not he the optimistic singer of universal brotherhood? He believed that man was

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made to rejoice, and that if he was prevented from realising his natural heritage of joy, it was because of conditions which man himself had created and would change. The dirge-like monotone, reiterant of what sounds like a chant of despair, is not the acceptance of the everlasting inevitability of human suffering. It is a grave and solemn statement, austere in its simplicity, of social facts, as they exist, as they ought not to exist, and as they need not exist. The doctrine of necessitarianism, as implying the permanence of injustice on earth, was as revolting to Burns as the doctrine of hell-fire hereafter.

He questioned the necessity for human wrong as emphatically as he questioned the necessity for Divine wrath. If injustice and wrong are inevitable, designed from all eternity to all eternity, why was the heaven-erected face of man adorned with the smiles of love? Why was an independent wish im-

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planted in the human mind? Man's nature cries out against it, and Burns, in the very act of describing the effects of social injustice, voices humanity's protest; the same protest which is on the lips of the workless man to-day, and puts power into the Socialist movement the wide world over. It is the same protest to which he gives utterance in another way in "The Twa Dogs." Brimful of humour, and of inimitable characterisation both of dogs and men, this poem is a veritable chapter of social history, a revelation of the life of the common people in the eighteenth century, and also of the other people whose life was that of the parasite; types who, differentiated only by changing fashion and industrial variation, are to be found in every society organised on the principle of production for profit. These two poems, wide apart as they are in point of style and colour—the one sombre and serious, the other humorous

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and serious—have this common characteristic, that while laying bare human follies arising out of social injustice they are free from class bitterness. They do not inspire to hatred. It is humanity that suffers, and it is humanity that is to blame, if blame there be. In “The Twa Dogs” especially there is a great and kindly human tolerance,

“ For thae frank, rantin’, ramblin’ billies,
Fient haet o’ them’s ill-hearted fellows.”

Yet it is these same frank, rantin’, ramblin’ billies whose social conduct gives force to the impeachment that “Man’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn.”

It is as if Burns had anticipated the modern Socialist maxim, “not the individual but the system.” Rich and poor are alike demoralised by the foolish and unjust social arrangements. The poor, the common people, suffer most ; they suffer all the time ; but the wrong is humanity’s. In brotherhood, and in brother-

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hood only, lies the means of righting the wrong. That was Burns' ideal.

It is not suggested that he had visualised to his own mind the new social order which would give reality to his ideal of brotherhood. We are speaking, not of a political economist, but of a poet, and of a poet whose life, involving a never-ceasing struggle merely to maintain a footing upon mother earth, precluded all opportunity—even supposing he had possessed the necessary temperament, and the times had been ripe—for that scientific inquiry into social problems which even the political economists had hardly begun. But the fundamental facts which are the basis of that inquiry were well known to Burns. Too well known. We know that in the later years of his life he had read at least twice over Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," borrowed from his friend, Graham of Fintry. He did not, however, require Adam Smith to explain to

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him that riches and poverty are correlated as cause and effect. That was one of the lessons he had been learning from his infancy in the hardest of schools. Nor did he require Adam Smith to prove to him that labour is the source of wealth. He had himself stated this, both in his poems and in his letters. The following passage from one of his letters to Mrs. Dunlop is a definite and clear statement of the relations between labour and capital, and would fall quite naturally from the lips of any twentieth-century Socialist: "'Tis now about the term day, and there has been a revolution among those creatures who, though in appearance partakers, and equally noble partakers of the same nature with Madame, are from time to time—their nerves, their sinews, their health, strength, wisdom, experience, genius, time, nay, a good part of their very thoughts—sold for months and years, not only to the necessities, the conveniences, but the caprices of the

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important few ;” and to Mr. Peter Hill he wrote, “I do not think that avarice of the good things we have is born with us ; but we are placed here amid so much nakedness and hunger, and poverty and want, that we are under a damning necessity of studying selfishness, in order that we may exist.”

There is plenty of evidence to show that he had a clear perception of the economic cause of poverty, and also a conception, if not of the actual remedial processes, certainly of the principle upon which those processes must be based. Professor Dugald Stewart expressed surprise that Burns had formed some conception of the “doctrine of association,” a surprise which illustrates naively the aloofness of the academic mind. The doctrine of association, whether of ideas or persons, is simply the philosophical formula for the poetic ideal which the wide world over is linked with the name of Robert Burns. In

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that ideal is embodied the principle of all social progress. For if brotherhood be the ideal, it is also, though it seems a paradox, the means towards the ideal. Only by brotherhood can brotherhood be established. It is impossible to conceive of any other way. In the beginning it may be a brotherhood of defence, as of the family, or of the clan ; but in the end it must be a brotherhood of love. That is the poet's conception. The "doctrine of association," says the philosopher. "Organisation and co-operation," says the Socialist. "Brotherhood," says the poet. It is the business of the Socialist to give effect to the poet's ideal ; and it is very doubtful if this great principle could have got itself so widely spread and so deeply rooted in the hearts of men if this Robert Burns had not been there in the eighteenth century to give it utterance in such a way as to appeal to the mind of the common people. In the directness and

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simplicity of the appeal lies its strength and power. "It's comin' yet, for a' that!" Faith and confidence are more than half the battle. The fact that these words have been singing round the world for a hundred years is worth more to the cause of human progress than whole libraries of philosophy. They are, in truth, the sum of all true social philosophies.

BURNS THE REBEL

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THAT this man, to whose nature liberty was as the very breath of life, should, when the time came, find himself in active sympathy with the French Revolution and with the American Revolution was inevitable ; just as inevitable as that the present-day British Socialist should find himself in sympathy with the revolutionists of Russia, with the educationists of Spain, and with the movements for self-government in Ireland and India. And it was just as natural that the authorities of his time should seek to repress and suppress Robert Burns as it is that the government of to-day should misrepresent and if possible suppress Socialist sympathy with these latter movements. The analogy should not be lost sight of either by Socialists or by the critics of Socialists.

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The Reform associations and corresponding societies stood relatively in much the same position towards the ruling powers as do the Socialist organisations of to-day. And just as history has justified the former, so will it justify the latter. Burns' biographers have, I think without exception, chosen to adopt a tone of apology concerning his attitude at this period of his life, as if his outspokenness were some kind of lapse from common sense, a foolish, irresponsible indiscretion, excusable in a man like Burns, but highly regrettable.

There is no ground for such a view. Burns' attitude was entirely consistent with his past life, with his own nature. and with the spirit of his poetic work. The same impulse which in the earlier Mauchline days threw him on the side of the religious reformers, in the Dumfries period threw him on the side of the revolutionists. Had he failed to choose his side, and to choose the right side, he would

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have been recreant to those very principles of liberty of which his genius has made him, in literature at least, one of the chief protagonists. He could do naught else. It was the common people who had risen, and he was one of them. His sympathy with the revolutionists was the proof that whatever modification of outlook had come to him in his brief passage through the world of wealth and fashion, his belief in freedom and his love for the common people had remained steadfast, uncorrupt and incorruptible. The Burns who wrote the "Ode to Liberty," the "Welcome to Despots," and the "Ballad on the American War," was the same Burns who wrote the "Holy Fair" and "The Ordination."

But there was a difference. Some of the power had gone out of him. His faith in freedom was undimmed, but he himself had lost some of his freedom. And he had lost it even through the very means he had taken

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to secure it. It was to secure his own personal independence that he took service in the Excise. To "mak' siccar" at least against the extreme rigours of poverty for his wife and family, and thereby hold himself free in his hours of leisure to follow the muse without fear or favour: that was why Robert Burns became a gauger. And this that was meant for the rock of his independence became as a rock of serfdom to which he was chained. Every word spoken in sympathy with Washington and the American patriots, every word spoken in sympathy with the common people in France was a word spoken against the British Government, his employers, who held control of his material destinies. Had he been worldly wise and a time-server, as some of his commentators seem to think he ought to have been, he would have remained silent. That was impossible for Robert Burns. So he spoke out, and there was probably more moral

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courage in the speaking out than he has ever received credit for. In the early days when he struck out against bigotry he was unknown, and his public was only a small Ayrshire parish. Now he was well known and famous, and his audience was the whole nation. He knew this quite well. And he knew also that the nation, officially through its Government and through its governing classes, was opposed to the opinions which he felt bound to express.

Yet there can be no doubt that the knowledge of the possible consequences to his family, the thought of what the loss of his one meagre source of income would mean to them, limited and curbed the force of his expression. And when the official coercion was applied—as it was bound to be—he made his submission, and democracy's greatest voice was stifled at the moment when democracy had most need of it. That, to me, is the real tragedy of Robert Burns. In his soul he was

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humiliated and he was a proud man this peasant.

“Burns was a poor man by birth and an exciseman by necessity ; but—I will say it—the sterling of his honest worth no poverty could debase, and his independent British mind oppression might bend, but it could not subdue.” Thus he wrote to John Francis Erskine, under stress of the occasion, and in anticipation of posterity’s verdict.

The situation could not be better described. He was bent, but not broken. And the bending of Robert Burns must have meant for him a process of mental conflict which one would rather not think of. Nevertheless, he left no room for doubt, either to his contemporaries or to posterity, as to his attitude towards those great events which were convulsing Europe and laying the foundations of a new nation in America. In these days all kinds of pretenders seek to associate themselves with the name of Robert Burns ; but no

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defender of class privilege, no opponent of liberty, no traitor to democracy has a right to claim that Robert Burns is on his side.

Not the least bitter element in the situation was the fact that his country, Scotland, the land he loved, was through its governing classes suborned to the cause of the oppressor. He was, in his blood and marrow, a patriot. Love of country was like a religion to him. It was his daily theme. But his patriotism was no narrow, selfish creed. Love of country with him was simply love of liberty expressed in the terms of nationalism. A country enslaved was a country to be made free. And it was this beloved country of his, his "auld respectit mither," the land whose greatest glory it was that it had stood among nations for the principle of independence. It was this dear land that, in the same hour

"Which saw the generous English name
Link't with such damned deeds of everlasting shame,"

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was made to associate itself with the infamy and dishonour.

“ Thee, Caledonia ! Thy wild heaths among,
Famed for the martial deed, the heaven-taught song,
To thee I turn with swimming eyes !
Where is that soul of Freedom fled ?
Immingled with the mighty dead
Beneath that hallowed turf where Wallace lies.”

Strange it is, that amid all the thousand annual orations to the memory of Burns the patriot, Burns the poet of brotherhood, Burns the nature-lover, there should seem to be a common conspiracy to becloud and hide the figure of Burns the rebel.

We know, and Burns knew, that the common people, both in England and Scotland, were guiltless of the crimes against liberty committed by their governments—that they, in fact, were amongst the sufferers from those same crimes ; and that wherever possible, and by the only methods available, they were making their protest. They had on

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their own account the same quarrel with their governments as their compeers in Europe. Liberty was being throttled, and nowhere more ruthlessly than in Burns' own country, where packed juries and vindictively brutal judges were overriding even the not very tender existing laws, to intimidate the Reform leaders and terrorise the people. It was fated that Burns should never get into close touch with the Reform movement. By the time it had emerged convulsively from the embryonic stage his race was nearly run. While the Reform leaders were being transported to Botany Bay he was at hand-grips once more with poverty and with the unmistakable symptoms of deadly disease; precariously holding house and home together, and still writing immortal verse on fifty pounds a year, and even that being threatened. He had been even poorer than that in his time,

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in the years when his father had to fight the same heart-breaking battle.

“The piebald jacket let me patch once more,”
he wrote to Graham of Fintry,

“On eighteenpence a week I’ve lived before.”

But that heroic alternative was not possible now with a wife and family dependent upon him. And knowing what we know of Burns, of his nature, and of his life’s record, we come to the conclusion that it was poverty, and that alone, that in the last years of his life lost Burns to the Reform movement.

THE MIGHT HAVE BEEN

THE MIGHT HAVE BEEN

HUMANITY has a heavy indictment against this evil which we call poverty. It is no mere idle speculation to say that the whole world was the loser through the poverty of Robert Burns. We may set aside the plea so often put forward, that the hard conditions of the peasant's nursing-ground for his particular kind of genius.

That theory may suit men like Lord Rosebery, who can look at poverty philosophically, from afar off; or men like Mr. Andrew Carnegie, who can look backwards and downwards upon poverty. It is not in accord with the laws of growth and development. The fruits of Burns' genius would have been greater had the material conditions of his life been better. Poverty never was good for man nor woman. The poverty-stricken man of genius is as an eagle with leaden-weighted pinions. He may soar high, but his flight is

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neither so lofty nor so far as it would have been without the fetters. Carlyle, himself, peasant's son and man of genius, and to this day the one man who has looked with true sympathetic insight into the soul of this other peasant's son, speaking on this very aspect of the question, and with reference to Burns' father, says : " Had this William Burns' small seven acres of nursery-ground anyway prospered, the boy Robert had been sent to school, had struggled forward as so many weaker men do, to some university, come forth not as a rustic wonder, but as a regular, well-trained, intellectual worker, and *changed the whole course of British literature*—for it lay in him to have done this." That is to say, had Burns' father been secure against poverty, his son Robert would have changed the whole course of British literature.

In these pages I have been arguing that even as it was he did that to some extent. He

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changed the outlook, and gave a new direction to the stream of poetic thought ; nay, more, he changed the nature of the stream itself, giving it that democratic and humanitarian impulse and colour whose course and character can be traced through the whole of nineteenth-century literature, "as streams their channels deeper wear." But there can be no question that had his poverty been less, his powers would have been greater. Doubtless Carlyle was right. A university education would have been of great value to Robert Burns. We can judge of that by the heroic use which he made of the intermitting educational opportunities that came his way.

But deprivation of university training was not the worst turn that poverty did for Burns. It beset him at every step of his journey through life. And, especially at that supreme period of crisis when his whole future career depended upon what step he should take next, poverty

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drove him into a corner, and left him without an alternative between ruin and the patronage of the rich. Had not Burns been driven to desperate straits, the second edition of his poems would have been published, like his first, from Kilmarnock, and there would never have been any dedication to the noblemen and gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt—those “distinguished members of the northern aristocracy,” as Lockhart styles them—whose distinction would have died with them but for their accidental association with the ploughman. We are here, of course, in the region of the “might have been,” but it is a reasonable conjecture that if the Edinburgh adventure could have been avoided, if Burns could have gone on steadily developing his powers at home in Ayrshire, maturing his genius in the same soil and atmosphere in which it had been nourished, his subsequent career, though less cometary and wayward, would have been

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quite as brilliant, and more satisfactory. The Edinburgh period was the least prolific, poetically, of his life, and its experiences and associations the least useful and stimulating. He himself was conscious of this, and after the first six months was sick of it, and looking for a way out, and for some secure anchorage from whence he could earn a competent living without hindrance to the free exercise of his poetic faculty. This was the one thing, apparently, which neither his literary patrons nor the northern aristocracy could give him. They did what they could in their well-meaning, condescending, patrician way. Let us give them all due credit and honour. Their help was necessary to Robert Burns at this juncture, and they gave it, some of them generously ; but it was necessary only because of the poverty of Robert Burns. It is not the Edinburgh gentry I am indicting, but poverty. As he himself said later, when

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forced to take refuge in the Excise, "The question is not at what door of fortune's palace shall we enter in ; but what doors does she open to us ? " This was the only door that opened to him, and poverty drove him through it.

But our indictment against poverty in the case of Robert Burns goes much deeper, and it is not quite the same as Carlyle's. It is not that poverty withheld from him a university education, but that it withheld from him good health and length of days. Poverty killed him, as it has killed, and is killing daily, its tens of thousands of men and women of genius, and men and women of no genius.

The span of a man's life is threescore years and ten. Burns died at thirty-seven. He died at that age, not because he had lived fast, but because he had lived hard. It was not fast living nor deep drinking that killed Burns. It was overwork.

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Poverty took him in his tender years and set him there in the Ayrshire fields behind the plough. Ere his limbs were grown, ere his bones were set, poverty asked him to do more than a grōwn man's work. It exposed him to the winter's cold, to the summer's heat, to the heavy "trauchlin' " toil in the ploughing-field, to the long day's darg in harvest time. Poverty sowed the seeds of disease in his body ere he had well begun to live. Poverty took him in his boyhood's days, and cast over his youthful shoulders a burden of care such as in a well-ordered society no human being, old or young, will be asked to carry. When William Burns stood, as no man should have to stand before another man, "tholin' the factor's snash," Robert, in spirit, stood with him, and the iron entered into his soul. It was of these things Burns died at thirty-seven.

Rheumatic fever, consumption ; whatever the medical diagnosis, Burns died of poverty.

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I will be told that he was not alone ; that many others have had a similar fate. I know. That is part of the case for Socialism. But at present we are speaking of Robert Burns and the loss to literature and to humanity through his early death. He came of good stock. He had behind him many generations of the open-air life. He ought to have lived long. We know the kind and the quantity of his literary output during the years in which he lived, but even that does not give us the measure of his possible output during the years in which he *ought to have lived*. He had only just passed from the years of receptivity. All that fine work of his was no more than his literary apprenticeship, work produced for the most part responsive to the casual events of every passing day : the quarrels of sectarians, the amours of lads and lasses, the carousals of beggars, the singing of birds, the murmuring of streams, the whistling of the

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winds and the howling of the storms, the shining day and the gloomy night. His work as we have it is the recording of passing impressions, impressions which his genius transformed into works of art, most of them imperishable. But, in the natural course of life, the days of high purpose and supreme achievement lay all before him, the days that never dawned ; for poverty had killed him, and in killing him robbed the world of who shall say how much great poetic thought and noble inspiration.

There is no need to blame his contemporaries, the individual lairds, and factors, and government supervisors. They were, as we most of us are, but twigs on the social tree. Nor is there any need to indulge in retrospective pity for the man Robert Burns. We are not now considering Burns' loss, but humanity's loss. He, indeed, got more out of life than most men get. He got the love

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of women and the friendship of men, both of them in abundance. He got these because his nature would not be denied ; because on the social and passional sides his nature was at once winning and masterful, and, in the very reaction from the too stern discipline of material poverty, demanded full measure of compensation, and got it while life lasted.

We are considering now the economic environments which conditioned his life and shortened it ; not the influence of Bonnie Jean and Highland Mary, or of Willie Nicol and the barley bree, but of the heavy toil, and the high-rented land, and the hard bargain.

Quite a prosaic question this with which we are faced in Burns' life and death, but one which involves the future of poetry and art—the future, indeed, of civilisation. The question is—I am stating it crudely, I know—can social systems be much longer regarded as tolerable, which in their very nature hinder

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genius in every department from giving of its best? We have to sit in judgment upon ourselves collectively; upon society; and we have got to consider whether there is not now sufficient common sense in the world, or in our corner of it, to shape and mould a system of society which will not stone its prophets, nor make sport of its poets, nor starve its children, nor degrade its common people.

And this last is the most important, comprehending as it does all the others. For if it be true that the literature and art of the future must be democratic alike in its source and its tendencies, at once revealing and inspiring the life of the common people, then in proportion as that life is healthy, vigorous, and free, in the same proportion will literature and art be virile, original, and noble.

A REPRESENTATIVE MAN

A REPRESENTATIVE MAN

IT is with some fear and trembling I venture now to write concerning the poetic quality of Burns' work, concerning his place and value as inspired literary artist. It is of his power as a social force I have hitherto been writing, a power derived, of course, from his poetic force, and not separable therefrom, though it seems to me to have been so separated or altogether ignored by most of his commentators, even by those whose appreciation is most unrestrained. That, indeed, is my only apology for the writing of this book.

But of Burns the artist, of Burns the poet, how shall one hazard an opinion who is neither artist, nor poet, nor practised literary critic? I suppose it ought to be sufficient for me that

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he has been acclaimed as great poet and artist by other great poets and artists, and by all who are competent to judge of poetry and art. But it is not sufficient for me. I am not content merely to know that Shelley and Byron and Wordsworth and Browning, and Carlyle and Tennyson have all hailed him as a master. I want to know why he has charms for me, why he has charms for the common people. For it has to be acknowledged that while these other masters receive their homage almost exclusively from amongst that class—ever growing in numbers, let us hope—who love literature for literature's sake, Burns has won to himself the allegiance, not to say the affections, of great numbers who, outside of his sphere of influence, have little taste for literature. He holds the others too, it must be remembered, the cultured, book-learned people. His grip on the common folk is therefore not won by any debasement of the

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standard of literary workmanship, or by any sacrifice of artistic ideals. I want to know the secret of his power, and I want to know it, not from the literary critics, but at first hand if I can. Perhaps we shall get on the trail if we take Burns on that side where he is said to be most open to literary disparagement, where he is weakest rather than where he is strongest. "He has, moreover, little or no spirituality," says Walt Whitman in an estimate which, though appreciative, is curiously patronising in tone, coming from such a source. "He has, moreover, little or no spirituality. This last is his mortal flaw and defect, tried by highest standards." I suppose it is true; yet I call to mind Byron's retort upon his publisher: "You have so many '*divine*' poems—is it nothing to have written a *human* one?" We have so many poets of "spirituality"—is it nothing to have a poet of humanity? Therein, probably, lies some part of his

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affinity with the common people ; for, if the truth must be told, the common people also have "little or no spirituality." They are flesh and blood. Their emotions are human emotions, not superhuman nor transcendental ; pertaining to the world of which they know rather than to ethereal, imaginary worlds of which they do not know—the loves and hates, and fears and joys, and sorrows of common life, out of which are materialised tragedy and comedy, and laughter and tears, and song. These things may not be described as spirituality in the esoteric sense. Yet they are of the spirit : the spirit of humanity. Burns trod the solid earth, and never at any time had his head in the clouds, else he had been no poet of the common people. He was no ecstatic dreamer of dreams, losing himself in those realms of poesy whose atmosphere is part speculative philosophy and part mysticism. Earth and sea and sky,

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and the heart of man, these he saw vividly,
nor sought to penetrate beyond :

“Farewell, thou fair day, thou green earth, and ye
skies,

Now gay with the bright setting sun ;

Farewell, loves and friendships, ye dear, tender ties,

Our race of existence is run.”

These four lines encompass Burns' entire poetic theme. Life and death, and their accessories. The world, and all that therein is. This world, his own small corner of it, held enough of beauty and pain and passion for him. He had no need—probably had not the power and inspiration—to build up fantastic other-worlds and fill them with imaginary pains and passions. Therein may lie, as Whitman says, “his mortal flaw and defect.” Yet, may it not be that in that same “mortal flaw” rests the secret of his immortal fame, the “touch of nature” illumined with genius, which makes him kin to the common people for all time.

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And there are compensations. Burns has that which is denied to some of the poets so richly endowed with spirituality, that which Whitman himself did not possess, or at least did not reveal; that which was granted to Chaucer and Shakespere and withheld from Shelley and Keats. He had humour. I have heard it conjectured that if to the intensity and lofty imagination of Shelley we could have had conjoined the humour of Burns, the result would have been a man of genius greater than Shakespere. That, of course, is mere hypothetical guesswork, which has no ending, and leads nowhere. But there can be no question that it is the possession of this faculty of humour by Burns, combined with his power of characterisation, which has led some not incompetent critics to classify his genius as Shakesperian.

I am making no such claim. I am merely claiming that we have here a more than

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adequate offset to the lack of spirituality. There are, indeed, experts in psychological hair-splitting who assert that humour itself is a kind of spirituality, and along that line of reasoning it might be maintained that "Tam o' Shanter" and "The Jolly Beggars" are quite as mentally stimulating as "Epipsychidion" and "Endymion."

For my present purpose these differentiations and comparisons do not matter. Burns is Burns, and Shelley is Shelley, and Keats is Keats. There is one glory of the sun and another of the stars, but which is which in the poetic firmament is for most of us determined by our point of view. I fancy that for the common people Burns is the sun, and these others are brilliant but rather coldly-shining stars ; the reason being, that he is nearer to them. They can feel his warmth, and enjoy his light, and they and he have certain attributes in common, one of the chief of which is

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this sense or faculty of humour. The common people have not much leisure for dreaming dreams or seeing visions, but they can laugh, and they can make laughter. They can make laughter sometimes even out of their own miseries and misfortunes.

Burns did this, but he did more. He made laughter out of their most serious conventional beliefs, and revealed these beliefs for what they really were—superstitions. The humour of Burns when expressed in satire almost amounts to a kind of national introspection. The Scottish people laughed—and are laughing still—at the grotesque conception of religion as satirised by Burns, but when they found that they were laughing at themselves that grotesquerie was doomed. Burns did what the great poets of spirituality could not do, because they had no humour: he initiated a spiritual revolution. Milton made Satan a Titanic rebel; Burns made him a laughing-

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stock. Dante made Hades magnificently terrible ; Burns abolished it. For who would be terrified by so familiar a fiend as “Auld Nickie-ben ?” The everlasting fire lost its terrors when it became a “lowin’ heugh,” and with the removal of the “fear o’ hell,” clarity of vision in matters spiritual became possible. The humour of Burns was a freshening wind lifting the theological mists and fogs from the human mind, and thereby opening out new and wider spiritual horizons.

And it is withal a rare, versatile, catholic humour, generous as well as sarcastic, kindly as well as caustic, fitting itself to all occasions and to every shade of character. Everywhere it “mak’s itsel’ at hame.” At kirk or market, at the plough tail or at the smiddy fire, by the ingle-neuk or in the tavern. It smites like Burnewin’s forehammer, and every stroke “comes on like death.” It jags like a Scotch thistle, caresses like a mither’s sang, or

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insinuates itself persuasively like a soft-blowing westlan' win'. It "dinner's wi' a lord," goes wooin' with peasant lads and lasses, has whimsical greetings for the world's newcomers, and hobnobs in "twa-handed crack" with the king of terrors himself.

And for all its free-flowing abandon—nay, because of that—we know it for the output of an artist, for the product of a conscientious craftsman who, even while he deprecatingly described his work as "stringin' blethers up in rhyme," took infinite pains with the workmanship and pride in the result. His style, vocabulary, rhymes and measures reflect his themes and moods. His medium and materials correspond to his purpose, which is surely the essential thing in art. The words "come skelpin', rank and file," the right, true, natural words as they might have fallen shrewdly from the lips of workaday men and women, and have all the effect of

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spontaneity ; as involuntary as laughter itself, and as infectious.

This indeed is the impression produced by nearly all Burns' work — spontaneity, involuntariness, freshness. There may have been midnight oil, but you can never feel the smell of it. Instead there is the fragrance of the woods, the smell of the earth, and—let it be admitted quite freely—the aroma of Scotch whisky ; but always natural simplicity of expression. It is this quality which makes him the most tuneful of all the lyrists. His melody is unforced. Like his humour it seems to come easily, naturally, as the song of a laverock, as the song of a mother to her bairn, as the song of a lover to his lass. That is really what Burns' songs are. They are not merely Burns' songs. They are the songs of birds and streams and mothers and lovers innumerable. They are musical and natural because they have their source in

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music and in nature. He has himself given away his secret most melodiously :

“ On braes when we please then,
We’ll sit an’ *sowth a tune* ;
Syne rhyme till’t, we’ll time till’t,
An’ sing’t when we hae dune.”

Surely this is the natural way of the maker of songs. The “sowthing,” lilting, or humming of tunes is the instinctive habit of all healthy human beings. Wherever you find a healthy man, woman, or child, there is a tune either on the lips or in the heart. The mother “sowths” or “croons” to her bairn, the workman to his task, the lover to his sweetheart, and the whole world of common folk “sowth” the tunes that have come to them, they know not how, like the air they breathe. This they did at least in the age of Robert Burns, until the factory system came and we had to get our tunes “sowthed” for us by machinery, by barrel-organs and gramophones.

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Burns sowthed and sowthed the old, old tunes which were the common heritage of the common people. The "mither tongue," the inspired thought, and the cadences of the familiar airs joined themselves together, and in the threefold communion we got that supreme achievement in lyrical art, the songs of Robert Burns. Burns is the folk-singer turned artist.

And because of that, because he is the singer of the songs of common folk, his appeal is of the kind that is for ever contemporaneous, not dependent for its vitality upon its association with any passing or past phase of history or with any particular school of culture ; not dependent either upon the fact that it reflects the habits and customs of a given period, but upon the fact that it reflects the emotional instincts of the common people at *all* periods. It is of course of the highest value, from the point of view of Scottish

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nationality, that the national characteristics and ways of life should have found poetic expression just at the time when, in obedience to the pressure of industrial development, they were about to undergo some measure of—at least external—change, and it is of great importance for the preservation of Scottish nationality that the very spirit of the nation, its love of independence and liberty, should have been enshrined in never-dying song. It is these services that establish him in the mind of the whole world as the national poet of Scotland. But along with these there goes that expression of those natural impulses which are not determined by national or local environment, which are common to humanity everywhere, and have their source in the universal human heart. Artificialities, and fashions, and laws, these may come and go and come again ; but the way of a man with a maid, the way of a mother with her child,

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the way of a friend with his friend, the companionship of man with man, the companionship of man with nature, these remain. The love-makings among the Ayrshire "Rigs o' Barley," or on the "Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon," have their counterparts the wide world over; and in every land, John Anderson and his jo spend canty days wi' ane anither, and go hand in hand down the hill of life. It is the rendering in song of all these commonplace—and because commonplace, therefore sacred—human experiences which constitutes Burns by universal consent, the poet of humanity.

The poet of humanity, and something more. For he was among the first to bring the lower animals into the fellowship. His sense of brotherhood was as wide as that. It was not restricted to the human species. In these days the endowment with human attributes of what we are pleased to call the brute creation

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has become quite a familiar phase in literature, and has been carried by Maeterlinck and Rostand into the region of the symbolical. It was Robert Burns who led the way. It is conceivable, for example, that "Rab and his Friends" would never have found a place in literature had they not been preceded by "Luath" and "Cæsar" and *their* friends. If the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields could find articulate voice, or if we could imagine them as capable of handing on bird and beast traditions from generation to generation, surely the most grateful of their memories would have root in the time when the ploughman poet walked the Ayrshire fields. For ever since that time there has been a growing tenderness on the part of human beings towards the more helpless constituents in the scheme of nature. In Burns the predatory and primitive instincts of Man the Hunter

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disappear, and are replaced by the cultivated kindness of Man the Brother—

“Avaunt, away ! the cruel sway,
Tyrannic man’s dominion ;
The sportsman’s joy, the murd’ring cry,
The flutt’ring, gory pinion !”

Here again we have Burns in the character of folk-singer. It is in the comradeship of common folk that the auld farmer’s mare, and the ploughman’s collie, and the “pet yowe,” and even the field-mouse, enter into the songs of Burns. And not only the domesticated associates of the hearth and the stable and the farm-stead, but the wild, free “commoners of air,” and the very troutlings in the running streams, are sharers in the kinship—

“On ilka hand the burnies trot,
And meet below my theekit cot ;
The scented birk and hawthorn white
Across the pool their arms unite,
*Alike to screen the birdie’s nest
And little fishes’ caller rest ;*
The sun blinks kindly in the biel’,
Where blythe I turn my spinnin’-wheel.

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*On lofty aiks the cushats wail,
And echo cons the doolfu' tale ;
The lintwhites in the hazel braes,
Delighted, rival ither's lays ;
The craik amang the claver hay,
The paitrick whirrin' o'er the ley,
The swal ow jinkin' round my shiel,
Amuse me at my spinnin'-wheel."*

This is a true folk-song ; one of many in which the peasant-world and the world of nature intermingle and unify. Non-sentient nature also comes into the brotherhood : the woods and streams, and moors and mosses, and perfume-laden winds, they too are fraternal, not less than the "ourie cattle," the "jinkin' hares," the "deep-toned plovers," and "happin' wee things." With Burns, nature is not a world apart and outside of man—

"O Nature ! a' thy shews an' forms
To feeling, pensive hearts hae charms !
Whether the summer kindly warms,
Wi' life an' light,
Or winter howls wi' gusty storms,
The lang, dark night."

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With Burns, nature is friendly, companionable, intimate, familiar ; relating itself continually to the moods and passions and experiences of common folk, either in association or in contrast—

“ How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae weary, fu’ o’ care ? ”

And hereat, I think, we get to the very essence of Burns’ genius. He relates himself to the common people, just as nature does. His genius is nature song-embodied ; nature, as the common people know it. He responds and corresponds to their intuitions, impulses, and feelings. His power and strength and music ; his humour and mirth and tenderness ; his occasional grossness ; his directness and simplicity, are reflections of the same qualities in the common people.

In them these qualities are diffused, distributed here and there. In him they are

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fused, harmonised, and intensified. He is a Representative Man, alike in his nationalism and in his humanism. He is representative at once of the spirit of the Scottish nation and of the spirit of common humanity. This may not be testing him by "highest standards," but it is testing him by standards that are permanent.

The power and influence of Robert Burns cannot die until the idea of nationality has died out of the minds of the Scottish people, nor until the idea of Brotherhood has lost its hold upon the human race. And as both these ideas are imperishable, so also is the power of Robert Burns.

"The poet," says Emerson, "is the eternal man." I should say that the genius of Burns typifies the eternal common man, he himself being, just because of that, one of the most uncommon of men, radiating in streams of poetic light all those varied emotional qualities

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which he has derived through his intuitive sympathy with ordinary human nature. With him the commonplace becomes poetic, and therefore no longer commonplace. Burns, not less than the transcendentalists, is a seer of visions—terrestrial, if you will, not celestial—visions of the possibilities of man as a social being. His conception of the poet's mission, as he himself describes it, is to preserve, with soul erect, "the dignity of man." I do not know that Art has ever yet set itself any more ennobling vision or truer purpose than that.

That he was a great artist as well as a great poet—that is to say, great in execution as well as in conception—needs not now to be argued. But the source of his artistic instinct has been for the most part overlooked. He was an artist just as every conscientious workman is potentially an artist. Not the least of the evils arising out of modern industrialism is the tendency to make all production a question

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of mechanics rather than of craftsmanship, and the workman himself a machine rather than a craftsman. Burns took pride in the artistry of his songs, just as, we may be sure, he took pride in ploughing his furrows straight ; and the quality and quantity of the workmanship, either of songs or furrows, was never conditioned by the nature of the reward. It is impossible to think of Burns as measuring the value of his poetic output by so many shillings or guineas per stanza, as some modern poets are said to do. He never wrote a line for money, or for the prospect of money. He got some little money out of the published editions of his works, and was glad to get it, but it was not for that he wrote. Publishing was an afterthought. Literature as a profession, as a means of living, was no part of his personal scheme of life. He was willing always to earn his living in other ways, that he might keep his muse unsubservient to the

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despotism of natural necessity. He held to this ideal to the very last, and when he had settled down to the work of reclaiming and purifying the ancient folk-songs of Scotland, resented the bare suggestion of money payment. "Foolish and quixotic!" we say. But while we say it, we are proud and glad that Burns acted so; that here was one man whose devotion to Art was pure and disinterested. "The labourer is worthy of his hire." Yes; but here is where Burns stands out. He was a labourer in Poesy's vineyard; but a hireling never. His genius was not for sale. He gave it freely to his country and to humanity. There probably never was any true artist who did not, in his soul, wish that he could go and do likewise. For the high service which this Scottish peasant rendered to Art and to Humanity his memory deserves to be held in honour, whether by sculptured monuments or by annual 25th of January

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sacraments. But most of all by striving to give reality to his ideals. To drink to his memory is nothing, to write orations about him is nothing, to write books about him is nothing, unless along with these we in our own day and generation, with what talents and opportunities we are possessed, and with the help of his inspiration and that of other teachers, and in co-operation with all who are like-minded, seek for the ways and means to abolish poverty and establish Liberty and Brotherhood, not for some men, but for all mankind.

A poet's dream! If you say so, then it is a dream—*for you*. It is because we have held it for a dream that it remains unrealised. If it be a dream, then Robert Burns and all the world's poets have lived in vain.

To doubt that Liberty and Brotherhood are attainable is the most damnable heresy. It is high treason to the *race*, and amongst

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the multitude of modern infidelities is the only infidelity that matters.

“ For a’ that, and a’ that,
It’s comin’ yet for a’ that,
When man to man, the world o’er,
Shall brithers be for a’ that ! ”



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